

Southern Appalachian Creature Feature Podcasts

Spruce Pine Dam Removal

A little bit of river history was recently made in western North Carolina as a decrepit dam was removed from the North Toe River in Mitchell County.

The dam was built in 1918, but it has been abandoned since the 1940s or 50s. It was partially dynamited in 1960 to clear accumulated silt. What remains are massive slabs of concrete and scattered pieces of the dam's inner workings.

Often dams, poorly-designed bridges and poorly installed culverts prevent aquatic animals from moving up or downstream to take advantage of quality habitat. In this case, removing the dam will open up access to 44 miles of river upstream of the dam. State records show two rare fish, the olive darter and sharphead darter were historically found above the dam, but today are only found below the dam, and it's hoped the removal will allow these fish access to the upper portion of the river.

Additionally, removing the dam may help the endangered Appalachian elktoe mussel, also found downstream of the dam. The mussel may be able to colonize the area around the dam site, while removal may help the fish the mussel depends on to complete its life cycle. Like most North Carolina freshwater mussels, the elktoe spends part of its life attached to the gills and fins of a fish host. Removing the dam will open up additional habitat for these fish hosts, strengthening their populations which in turn should benefit the elktoe.

For WNCW and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, this is Gary Peeples.